

PAGE TWO



From left: Passersby walk down a street with pet-themed walls in Shanghai in June. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY A dog waits to dine at a pet-friendly restaurant in Beijing in July. LIU ZHE / CHINA DAILY Residents with their pets pose for photos during a pet party held by a shopping mall in Tianjin in July. TONG YU / CHINA NEWS SERVICE



Pets: Sector rises with luxury, greater rights

From page 1

Since their introduction in February, the special cakes have been in short supply and pet owners now need to make an order one day in advance. On HolilandPet's official shop on the online shopping platform Taobao, sales records showed that more than 2,000 people bought the cakes in the last month. Most buyers are content with their purchase and are pleased the big-name brand endorses the safety of the cakes.

"When I learned such a big brand had begun making cakes for pets, I couldn't wait to let my baby have a taste," said Xu. "I've made cakes for Laksa myself, and I know how hard it is to make a well-balanced cake that suits a pet's taste. The money was well spent. My pet taught me how to love again, and I want to give him a better life."

Animal attraction

Although a luxurious pet lifestyle may seem excessive to some people, it reflects a large cultural shift in modern Chinese society toward treating animal companions as members of the family.

Beyond haute cuisine, this phenomenon has expanded into designer pet apparel, home customization services, and even pet fashion shows.

During a recent pet fashion show in Shanghai, over 300 cats and dogs dressed in glamorous outfits were paraded on a runway by their owners when 12 pet brands launched their newest collections at the Shanghai Fashion Center in Yangpu district.

"We found that the emotional connections between modern urban pet owners and their animal companions have deepened immensely. Pet owners have begun to pay more attention to their pets' spiritual demands in addition to their basic physiological needs. So we tried to integrate the pets and fashion," said Zhang Xin, executive deputy manager of the Shanghai Fashion Center.

The center intends to attract more upstream and downstream brands in the pet industry in the future, so that the pet "ecosystem" can congregate in Yangpu, Zhang added.

Wu Haiping, the founder of PetMrWu pet clothing, sees a vast untapped market as people's demand for pet companionship grows.

Wu is a costume designer and owns a dog and a cat. He set up the brand and commercialized it in 2021, initially because he was not satisfied with the majority of pet clothing available in the market.

"At first, pet clothing was just smaller versions of what humans were wearing. I could see pets were uncomfortable wearing such clothes," Wu said.

His custom-made pet clothing, which sells for 300 yuan to thousands, uses antimicrobial and natural fabrics and takes into consideration animal exercise habits that differ from humans, or even between species.

Shanghai-based design and development company Dingchong provides services to customize home environments so pets can live more comfortably.



Pet owners shop with their dogs at a pet store in a Beijing shopping mall in January. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Customers check the menu at a pet-friendly restaurant in Shanghai in February, 2023.

WANG GANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

The company said it specializes in high-end homes for pets.

"Our customers are mainly singles, newly married couples, DINK (double income no kids) families, and those whose children have grown up and moved out. They own large living spaces, and they're willing to spend on customized living spaces to make their pets more comfortable," said co-founder Qiu Limin.

The brand works on creating independent spaces dedicated to the pets' needs that include medical areas, isolation zones, and play areas. The designs are made after doing research on aspects such as feline ergonomics, with "customer unit prices" running to at least five-figure sums.

"For example, we'll make lower furniture for Munchkin cats who can't jump as high, or install more vertical climbing structures for

active breeds like the Devon Rex," Qiu said.

Pet food makers, apparel designers, and service providers have also found profitable niche markets catering to owners' indulgence of their animal companions. On Xiaohongshu, the Chinese lifestyle platform, videos of unboxing pet supplies or reviewing pet food garner millions of views.

Stepping out

Beyond high-end experiences, pets worldwide have been granted more accessibility and are being welcomed in public spaces that were previously off-limits. Many cities have made concerted efforts to upgrade parks, plazas, and other public places to be pet-friendly with amenities such as drinking fountains, dedicated pet zones, and waste disposal stations.

Shops have also followed suit by designating pet-friendly outdoor seating areas and offering specialized menus or treats for canine and feline patrons.

Starbucks is one of the pioneers in this area, introducing Puppucinos — whipped cream in an espresso cup — for dogs at their pet-friendly spaces. The coffee giant has also collaborated with pet lifestyle brands on accessories like the popular cat paw-shaped tumblers. Manner Coffee, HeyTea, KFC, and Shake Shack have also launched stores that welcome pets with tailored products and pet toy promotions.

Pets' access to public spaces, legal protection of their rights and welfare, and education and raised awareness of people's responsibilities toward them are core elements and indicators of a pet-friendly society, said Zhou Chunhua, secretary-general of the China Pet Industry Association.

The number of pet dogs and cats in China is estimated to grow from 190 million last year to 210 million in five years, according to the APA Institute's China Pet Industry Annual Report 2023.

The increasing pet population and diverse demands for services are driving the expansion of the pet market.

In 2023, the scale of China's pet market increased to nearly 250 billion yuan with a compound growth rate of 13.1 percent in the past five years, the report said. Food supplies accounted for more than half of the pet market, medical care nearly 30 percent, while services such as grooming and training accounted for 16 percent.

As societies increasingly care about pets, the pet economy will grow even further and embrace more specialized and lavish products and services, Zhou said. Pet veterinary care, intelligent devices, social platforms, eco-friendly food supplies, and sustainable lifestyles catering to pets are also expected to fuel expansion.

However, even as the sector booms, some questions have been raised about the growing number of premium pet products on offer. Animal welfare advocates have voiced concerns that profits are being put ahead of safety issues and consideration of the pets' well-being.

Zhou said as living standards have improved, owners have become more conscious about their pets' health and welfare and are willing to spend on quality food, medical care, and pampering services. She added that the pet industry has developed full life cycle supply chains around a pet's eating, living, medical and other needs.

However, Zhou believes that regulatory oversight is still insufficient with legal frameworks incomplete. Other areas of concern in the pet industry include a shortage of quality standards, fragmented multiagency governance, unregulated breeding and sales of pets, and a lack of social responsibility about pet ownership.

Addressing these issues and others will require government regulation, industry self-discipline, and public education, she said.

Shanghai unleashes festival to celebrate four-legged friends

By HE QI in Shanghai
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As Shanghai experiences a surge in pet-friendly activities and services, a growing number of commercial spaces are opening their doors to four-legged companions and offering entertainment.

A pet carnival with a fun playground will open in Shanghai Times Square from the end of April to June. Activities such as dog yoga, a pet fashion show, skateboarding, and cycling will be available for pets and their owners.

"Pets are becoming more like children to their owners rather than their good friends, which has led to increasing demand for pet entertainment," said Chen Xi, senior promotions manager at the shopping center.

Entitled "Woof! It's My World", the carnival will feature different themes every week, and is expected to attract 300 to 500 participants and bringing in over 10,000 visitors to the mall during the event.

"We will start with pet fashion shows and then launch a pet skateboarding activity, and invite the French bulldog community to take the lead in experiencing skateboarding."

"Doga, which enables dogs to practice yoga with their owners, and a cycling activity that uses our customized bicycles to ride with pets, have all attracted many applicants," said Chen, adding that a pet adoption event will be held as well.

A pet art exhibition, designed from a pet's perspective, will also be included. Chen said that all the paintings will be placed on the ground so that pets can view and enjoy them.

The carnival is intended to announce the transformation of the shopping center into a pet-friendly environment at a time

the pet economy is booming.

"We believe that the pet-friendly atmosphere in Shanghai's business community is among the best in the country," Chen said. "We plan to keep creating similar pet carnivals because we have always had a vision that every pet owner working in the CBD area will be able to leave their pets in a park when they are at work, pick them up after work and go home together."

As early as 2017, some local business with sufficient outdoor space began proposing pet-friendly measures.

Shanghai Suhewan Mixc World, a shopping center beside Suzhou Creek that opened in 2022, features a floor dedicated to pet-related stores. The photo studio HIMO, for instance, has customized its operations in the mall to take artistic photos of pets.

There are more than 50 pet-friendly stores in the mall offering service packages for pets that include grooming, spa, day care, hand-painted custom dog tags, baked goods and pet birthday parties.

Pet owners can also rent carts, raincoats, backpacks, drinking cups and leashes at the mall, while temporary pet care services charge between 25 and 40 yuan (\$3.5 and \$5.6) per hour.

The Bund Finance Center shopping mall now has over 90 pet-friendly shops and over 30 pet-friendly restaurants.

"In a recent survey of international talent recruitment and retention, we found that a city's pet friendliness is an important consideration for many young international talents when choosing a place to work and live," Lu Huiwen, a member of the Shanghai Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference told China-news.com.



Left: Wu Haiping, founder of PetMrWu pet clothing, walks on a runway along with a dog wearing his custom-made pet clothing during a pet fashion show in Shanghai. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Right: A model poses with dogs during a pet fashion show in Shanghai on March 23. GAO ERQIANG / CHINA DAILY